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Five College West African Music Ensemble



The mission of the Ensemble is to engage Five College students in playing music together, to engender interest, appreciation and respect for African music and musicians, and to educate audiences by creating performances in collaboration with African guest performers.

The Five College West African Music Ensemble, Directed by [Faith Conant](https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/facultyprofiles/faith-conant) (<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/facultyprofiles/faith-conant>) is made up of students from two classes, MUS 161 and 261. The group focuses on music from the Gbe-speaking people of southern Togo, Ghana, and Benin. Students learn to play authentic instruments (drums, bells, shakers), sing, and dance.

About

In addition to playing semester end concerts, the group is often invited to perform at events on campus and around the Five Colleges. Past performances have included Convocation, Africa Day, a museum performance honoring Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, No Study Zone, MHACASA events, Global Fest, and Pangy Day.

The Ensemble has had the fortune to collaborate with many African guest artists since its inception over a decade ago. Artists have included Samuel Nyamuame, Nani and Emmanuel Agbeli, Saeed Abbas, Rebecca Korley, the Gnonlonfoun family from Benin (Jomion and the Uklos), and Kwabena Boateng. The guest artists' support, teaching, and concert performances are an invaluable feature of the Ensemble experience.

Participation in the Ensemble has functioned as a starting point for deeper explorations of African music in the US and abroad. Several Ensemble students have traveled to continue their musical study in Ghana.

The Ensemble focuses on music from southern Togo, Ghana and Benin (from which much Haitian traditional music is descended). At the core of the Ensemble's repertoire are the dance-drumming pieces *Gahu* (a recreational piece originally from Nigeria), *Agbekor* (a music related to war) as taught by Nani Agbeli, and *Adjogbo* (a royal dance with chanted poems) as taught by Gadji Venance Folly. Diverse selections from these pieces, as well as selections from other pieces such as *Agbadza*, *Adzrowo*, and *Kpanlogo*, are chosen for study and performance according to student interest and ability. A dance component is essential to these art forms; students are required to participate in dance as well as play instruments and sing.

How do I join?

Students in the Ensemble include those who have never studied an instrument, music majors and jazz players, all of whom share an interest in African music and culture and a wish to experience the joy of making music with others. No reading of musical notation is required. Students learn pieces in class by ear through *vugbe*, "drum language", which refers to the naming of specific sounds made on the drums in a kind of indigenous *solfège*. Readings, video screenings, and class visits by African artists inform discussion of the sociocultural context of the music and its performance. The ensemble performs semester-end concerts featuring African guest artists.

Auditions

There are no auditions for MUS161 and no previous musical experience is necessary. MUS 161 is conceived as a year-long sequence (generally focusing on the pieces *Gahu* and *Agbekor*) and is the normal prerequisite for MUS 261 (*Adjogbo*).

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